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Protestant Theological Perspectives on the Contribution of Military Chaplains to Moral Formation

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Abstract

Military chaplains are involved in the moral formation of military personnel. They have to do justice to the internal perspective on morality of their religion, while honouring the plurality of perspectives. The objective of this article is to examine how the contribution of military chaplains to the moral formation of military personnel can be substantiated from a Protestant theological perspective. We first discuss Tillich's Protestant principle, which functions as a starting point and criterion in the moral discourse. We then show how Bonhoeffer combines a view of reality inspired by faith and a serviceable attitude towards reality. Finally, we focus on the role of theology and the role of the military chaplain as theologian in the moral formation of military personnel with the ideas of Volf and Croasmun. We conclude that Protestant theological perspectives on morality are vital to the moral formation of military personnel.

Keywords

military chaplaincy – moral education – secularization – Tillich – Bonhoeffer – Volf

1 Introduction

Serving in the armed forces implies that one can be ordered to use force: that can include the killing of fellow humans. In the military profession major moral questions are thus at stake. Freedom of religion, together with the separation of church and state, imply that military personnel must be offered the opportunity to think through the moral implications of their work from the perspective of their own religion or worldview.¹ Because of their independent position and the right of nondisclosure, military chaplains are the appropriate agents to support service members with regards to aspects of their moral formation that are related to their personal worldview and religious convictions. Just because of the freedom of religion, it might be expected that the military organization is reticent regarding the religious and philosophical aspects of the moral formation of its service members.

The moral framework that guides the armed forces and their deployments, is to a great extent derived from principles that originate from religious sources, such as the Christian just war tradition. This means that chaplains can make significant contributions to the moral formation of service members and the way they exercise their military profession from their own religious sources. Although the degree of independence of chaplains and their place in the military hierarchy varies in different Western countries, in general they have a distinctive role in guiding military personnel with the moral aspects of the military profession in relation to their personal worldviews and beliefs.

In the past, chaplains could rely on the shared frame of reference of military personnel of the same denomination. That commonality has now largely disappeared since most service members in a country like the Netherlands,² no longer subscribe to one of these denominations. This decline of traditional religions is accompanied by what Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead called the subjective turn in Western society, which includes an increase of other forms

1 Frank Cranmer, 'Chaplaincy and the Law', in *A Handbook of Chaplaincy Studies: Understanding Spiritual Care in Public Places*, ed. Christopher Swift, Mark Cobb and Andrew Todd (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 79–95.

2 Ton Bernts, Ruard Ganzevoort, Carlo Leget & Joanna Wojtkowiak, *Omvang en verdeling van de geestelijke verzorging in de krijgsmacht vanaf 2016* (Nijmegen: Radboud Universiteit, Universiteit voor Humanistiek & Vrije Universiteit, 2014), 33.

of spirituality.³ Although their research shows that transformation is taking place, they also note that the growth of other forms of spirituality has not compensated for the decline of traditional forms of religion.⁴ That means that religion and spirituality in general have lost significance for a growing part of society. This relative decline is especially true for men and younger people who are the very ones being over-represented in the military.

These developments raise the question, if and how the religions and worldviews that military chaplains represent are still of significance for the moral formation of military personnel: the inevitability of that question flows from how military chaplaincy, as it happens, in most Western armed forces represents institutionalized religions and worldviews in society.⁵ The presence of chaplaincy as representative of institutionalized religion in the armed forces, and in other semi-public domains has traditionally been legitimized by the government having a responsibility as guardian of religious freedom: everyone has the right to manifest one's religion or belief in practice.⁶ Based on this responsibility, the government ensures that those who by means of the government are deprived from contact with their religious community, then have access to a representative of that community. As a result of secularization and growing pluralism, this original legitimization of chaplaincy has become less convincing.

Chaplains in Western societies have not only struggled to adapt to the changing spiritual landscape; they must now seek to define their own professional mandate amid other professions addressing personal human problems.⁷ This challenge is reflected in the development of chaplains who, rather than being representatives of particular religious traditions, have become specialists in several fields, including ethics.⁸ This development applies to a certain extent

3 Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 2–5; 77–128.

4 Heelas & Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, p. 127.

5 Ronit Y. Stahl, *Enlisting Faith: How the Military Chaplaincy Shaped Religion and State in Modern America* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 6–14.

6 Universal Declaration of Human rights, Article 18, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> [accessed 28 June 2022].

7 John A. Bernau, 'From Christ to Compassion: The Changing Language of Pastoral Care', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 60:2 (2021), 362–381, doi: 10.1111/jssr.12711; Wendy Cadge, 'Healthcare Chaplaincy as a Companion Profession: Historical Developments', *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, 25:2 (2019), 45–60, doi: 10.1080/08854726.2018.1463617.

8 Waldemar Glusiec, 'Hospital Chaplains as Ethical Consultants in Making Difficult Medical Decisions', *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 48:4 (2022), 256–60, doi: 10.1136/medethics-2020-107096; Fiona Timmins, Silvia Caldeira, Maryanne Murphy, Nicholas Pujol, Greg Sheaf, Elizabeth Weathers, Jacqueline Whelan & Bernadette Flanagan, 'The Role of the Healthcare

also to military chaplaincy, where chaplains became increasingly involved in the teaching of military ethics.⁹ In the Netherlands, for example, chaplains supporting military staff to deal with moral tensions became an additional justification for the financial support by the government.¹⁰

The question, nevertheless, remains how religion should play a role in chaplains' moral teachings. One position is that secularization and the presence of institutionalized religion in the public moral domain do not have to be mutually exclusive: either institutionalized religions and worldviews are the guardians of the values on which a free democratic society is based, or these values are the outcome of a debate to which the different religions and worldviews in society make their contribution. Both positions confirm the so called *Böckenförde Dictum* that a democratic constitutional state draws its life from preconditions it cannot guarantee itself.¹¹ Military chaplaincies in several Western countries seem to hold this view, in which religions and worldviews

Chaplain: A Literature Review', *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, 24:3 (2018), 87–106, doi: 10.1080/08854726.2017.1338048.

- 9 Tor Arne Berntsen & Raag Rolfsen, 'Ethics Training in the Norwegian Defence Forces', in Paul Robinson, Nigel De Lee & Don Carrick, eds, *Ethics Education in the Military* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 95–118; Angelika Dörfler-Dierken, 'The Changing Role of Protestant Military Chaplaincy in Germany: From Raising Military Morale to Praying for Peace', *Religion, State and Society*, 39:1 (2011), 79–91; Anne C. Loveland, 'From Morale Builders to Moral Advocates', in Doris L. Bergen, ed., *The Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the First to the Twenty-First Century* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004) pp. 233–50; Andrew Todd, 'Reflecting Ethically with British Army Chaplains', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 7:4 (2009), 77–82, doi: 10.1080/15570274.2009.9523418; Stefan Werdiles, 'Ethical Education and Character Development in the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Germany', in Paul Robinson, Nigel De Lee & Don Carrick, eds, *Ethics Education in the Military* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 103–8.
- 10 Ernst Maurits Henricus Hirsch Ballin & Commissie van advies inzake de criteria voor steunverlening aan kerkgenootschappen en andere genootschappen op geestelijke grondslag, *Overheid, godsdienst en levensovertuiging: Eindrapport van de Commissie van advies inzake de criteria voor steunverlening aan kerkgenootschappen en andere genootschappen op geestelijke grondslag (ingesteld bij ministerieel besluit van 17 februari 1986, Stcrt. 1986, nr. 51)* ('s-Gravenhage: Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, Stafafdeling Constitutionele Zaken en Wetgeving, 1988), p. 50.
- 11 Erik Borgman, 'De onlosmakelijke verbondenheid van religie en publiek domein', in W. B. H. J. van de Donk, A. P. Jonkers, G. J. Kronjee and R. J. J. M. Plum, eds, *Geloven in het publieke domein: Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), pp. 315–36; José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung: Über Vernunft und Religion* (Freiburg: Herder, 2011); Fred van Iersel, 'Naar eer en geweten', in René de Boer, Jan Peter van Bruggen and Ger Wildering, eds, *Naar eer en geweten: Geestelijke Verzorging en de morele vorming in de krijgsmacht* (Budel: Damon, 2012), pp. 205–12 at p. 205.

fulfill a necessary function in moral formation. For instance, the British military chaplain has been described as interpreter of moral traditions including the moral tradition represented by the religion of the chaplain.¹² The role of German military chaplains was sketched as ‘conscience’ of the military and, in line with this sketch, moral education has the character of religiously inspired conscience formation.¹³ Dutch Military Chaplaincy Services described their role in moral formation as aimed at preserving the moral integrity of the service member as a person by paying special attention to the meaning of religion and worldview in the preservation of this integrity.¹⁴ For the function of religion in the moral roles of US military chaplains different proposals have been made: religion as a source of moral advice to commanders;¹⁵ as a foundation for moral resilience of service members;¹⁶ as a hermeneutical framework for the soulful aspects of military life¹⁷ or the religious aspects of war and conflict.¹⁸

This brief exploration shows that religions and worldviews can play a role in the contribution of military chaplaincy to the moral formation of military personnel. The first thing that stands out is that in various approaches the role of worldview and religion is limited to the domain of personal meaning and moral support for service members. For example, in the policy document on moral formation by the Dutch Military Chaplaincy Services it is stated that moral formation by the chaplaincy is aimed at the development of an independent and critically thinking and acting personality, in which a central place is assigned to the personal life story of the service member.¹⁹ These and various other approaches lack a description of the role that religion and worldview play in moral reflection on the military profession. This is unsatisfactory: it is precisely the case that the military profession is one in which a person can end

12 Andrew Todd and Colin Butler, ‘Moral engagements’, in Andrew Todd, ed., *Military Chaplaincy in Contention: Chaplains, Churches, and the Morality of Conflict* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), pp. 151–68 at pp. 163–5.

13 Dörfner-Dierken, ‘The Changing Role of Protestant Military Chaplaincy in Germany’, 87.

14 Beleidsnota morele vorming door de DGV (’s-Gravenhage: Diensten Geestelijke Verzorging, 2018).

15 John D. Carlson, ‘Cashing in on Religious Currency? Ethical Challenges for a Post-Secular Military’, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 7:4 (2009), 51–62, 54–7, doi: 10.1080/15570274.2009.9523415; Matthew Knight, *Making Military Chaplains Better Moral Advisors* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Proquest LCC, 2019), pp. 1–6.

16 James R. Lewis, *Spiritual Fitness and Resilience Formation through Army Chaplains and Religious Support* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University, 2015) p. 19; http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=kenti447863288 [accessed 28 June 2022].

17 Lewis, *Spiritual Fitness and Resilience Formation through Army Chaplains and Religious Support*, p. 219.

18 Carlson, ‘Cashing in on Religious Currency?’, 58–60.

19 Beleidsnota morele vorming door de DGV.

up in a situation in which he is forced to perform actions that he should never or would never perform in a personal capacity. Such profession calls for moral reflection that transcends the personal domain.

The second thing that stands out is that roughly two approaches are described in which religion and worldview play a role in the moral formation of military personnel. The first approach is to describe the value of a particular religion or worldview for the moral formation of the adherents of that particular religion or worldview.²⁰ Sometimes that may mean indicating that the insights described are also relevant for service members who hold a different faith or worldview.²¹ The justification for this approach is becoming increasingly difficult because the number of military personnel that feels attracted to an internal religious perspective on morality is already a minority and will probably continue to decline. The second way is to describe how religions and worldviews function as meaning-giving frameworks, with the dialogue between these meaning-giving frameworks yielding valuable moral insights.²² This approach is also difficult to justify because it does not do justice to the internal perspective of a particular religion or worldview of what is morally good, just, and worthy of pursuit, and its internal theological or philosophical underpinnings. In the first case, the contribution of religion and worldview to moral formation is exclusivist, in the second reductionist.

Can military chaplains then provide an approach from the religions and worldviews they represent that overcomes such objections? A way of addressing these concerns should first thematize morality from a transcending religious or ideological framework that reflects on the different moral aspects of the military profession. It should also do justice to the internal perspective of the particular religion on what is good, just, and worthy of pursuit, and at the same time take the plurality of perspectives on these themes into account. In this way the moral insights which emerge are also accessible to service members, who feel affiliated with another religion or worldview – or do not feel affiliated with religion or spirituality at all. By way of example, we take the chaplaincy service to which we are affiliated as a starting point, namely Protestant military chaplaincy, asking how religion can play a role in the moral

20 Dörfler-Dierken, 'The Changing Role of Protestant Military Chaplaincy in Germany'; Knight, *Making Military Chaplains Better Moral Advisors*.

21 Wildering, *Morele vorming in de krijgsmacht*, pp. 261; 335–340; Dörfler Dierken, 'The Changing Role of Protestant Military Chaplaincy in Germany', p. 86.

22 Todd and Butler, 'Moral Engagements'; Lewis, *Spiritual Fitness and Resilience Formation through Army Chaplains and Religious Support*; Beleidsnota morele vorming door de DGV.

formation of service members from a Protestant theological perspective.²³ In doing so, we hope to demonstrate that the religion we represent ourselves can contribute to the moral formation of military personnel and provide a public theological exploration of how this contribution can be understood. It is thus a form of public theology in which we develop a theological perspective on the contribution of military chaplaincy to the moral formation of military personnel: it seeks to be understandable and possibly convincing to those who adhere to the Christian faith as well to those who do not – but, nevertheless, acknowledge the public contribution of chaplaincy to the moral formation of military personnel.

2 Protestant Theological Perspectives on Moral Formation in a Plural Context

We turn to four Protestant public theologians who provide promising views which address both plurality of worldviews from an internal religious perspective and the preservation of moral integrity in situations of war and conflict. We start with Paul Tillich, in particular by discussing his Protestant principle. This principle might help to borrow the Protestant contribution to moral formation on the one hand and to prevent the absolutization of one's own religious position on morality on the other. Next, we address Dietrich Bonhoeffer's appreciation of a world which has come to age. His approach helps to acknowledge theologially that religions do no longer function as given authority and source of morality and at the same time he relates this acknowledgement to the heart of the Christian faith. Finally, we turn to how Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun understand the indispensable role of theology to reflect on the contribution of faith to the good life and the role of the theologian to articulate and live out the good life in a specific context. What we want to demonstrate here is that these theologians show in different ways that you can do justice both to the internal perspective of a particular religion or worldview and to the multiplicity of perspectives in a secularized society when thinking through the moral aspects of the military profession.

23 An earlier Dutch version of this exploration, which focusses on Protestant identity has been published in *Kerk en Theologie: Thijs Oosterhuis, 'Het verhaal achter de moraal: Protestantse Theologie en de morele vorming van militairen'*, *Kerk en Theologie*, 73:4 (2022), 393–411, doi: 10.5117/KT2022.4.006.OOST.

3 Tillich: Acknowledging the Absolute Imperative in a Relative Reality

At the outbreak of the First World War, the young pastor and recently graduated theologian, Tillich, volunteered to serve as an army chaplain to the German troops. His biographers differ on his attitude to the war at that time.²⁴ What is clear is that his experiences in the trenches for almost four years left deep marks on him. They radically influenced his thinking about church, faith and society. 'Tillich's conscience, as a child and youth, was formed by patriarchal family, monarchy, and ordered German life, which betrayed him and his generation. That morality died in the trenches of the Western front.'²⁵ Seeing that the world is secularizing and the church is losing its relevance in his eyes, he became a theologian of culture instead of being an ecclesiastical theologian. Tillich had already developed and articulated his ideas on this subject in various articles and contributions during the Weimar Republic.²⁶ Later, when he became known as a theologian in the US, these ideas were translated under his editorship and bundled in the edition *The Protestant Era*.²⁷

Tillich considered the idea of justification by faith to be the core idea of Protestantism. He applied this idea not only to the ethical, but also to the intellectual life. Not only is the sinner justified by faith, so also is the doubter. According to Tillich, doubt is filled with faith: faith in the truth itself, even if the only truth we can express is our lack of truth.²⁸ In the status of doubt, you are in the status of truth in the same way as you are justified as a sinner: if 'you are desperate about the meaning of life, the seriousness of your despair is the expression of the meaning in which you are still living.'²⁹ Through our doubt we are confirmed in the existence of truth and God: at the same time it can be shown that all our talk about God and the truth is surrounded by doubt and has a provisional character. This human condition implies what Tillich calls the Protestant principle. This principle 'contains the divine and human protest against any absolute claim for a relative reality.'³⁰ This principle came to

24 Renate Albrecht and Werner Schüssler, *Paul Tillich: Sein Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993), p. 37.

25 Ronald H. Stone, *The Ethics of Paul Tillich* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2021), p. 3.

26 Albrecht & Schüßler, *Paul Tillich*, p. 112.

27 Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era: Translated and edited by James Luther Adams* (London: Nisbet & Co, 1951).

28 Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, p. xxix.

29 *Ibid.*, p. xxx.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 239.

the fore in the Reformation era when both Lutherans and Calvinists protested against the absolute truth claims of the Roman Catholic Church.³¹ According to Tillich it is valid and applicable to every moment of history.³²

The Protestant principle is not dependent on, and does not coincide with historical Protestantism. It can be argued that Protestantism has alienated itself from the Protestant principle for various reasons.³³ According to Tillich, the Protestant principle can assert its absolute claim because it is not part of relative reality, but arises from the form, the Gestalt of grace, as Tillich calls it: the absolute manifests itself in relative reality. 'The Gestalt of grace is not a Gestalt besides others but the manifestation of what is beyond every Gestalt through a Gestalt.'³⁴

The Protestant principle plays an important role in Tillich's ethics. Because people do not coincide with their biological existence, people can determine their own existence to a certain extent. This is the basis for human freedom, which he describes as 'not to be bound to ones given nature while in that nature at the same time.'³⁵ Because this characterizes, or stated differently, this is the hallmark of our humanity, every person must relate to the intrinsic and unconditional task of giving substance to this freedom. For Tillich, this is the ethical implication of the ontological structure of 'being.'³⁶ The Protestant principle then means that no absolute validity can be claimed for any moral law that is part of relative reality and a moral law that is part of the absolute has no influence on people who have to relate to an ever-changing relative reality.³⁷ The question becomes whether there is a connecting element between the absolute moral demand and the relative ever-changing reality. According to Tillich, love (*agape*), as described in the New Testament, is this unifying element. The commandment to love is unconditional and breaks through all other commandments. 'Love alone can transform itself according to the concrete demands of every individual and social situation without losing its eternity and dignity and unconditional validity. Love can adapt itself to every phase of a changing world.'³⁸ To indicate how to actualize love in the sense of *agape*, Tillich introduces the New Testament concept of *kairos*, which he believes refers to the historical moment when something of eternal importance

31 Ibid., p. 226.

32 Ibid., p. xxvi.

33 Ibid., pp. 253–9.

34 Ibid., p. 211.

35 Ibid., p. 130.

36 Ibid., p. 132.

37 Ibid., p. 167.

38 Ibid., p. 173.

manifests itself in time. It is important to recognize and appreciate those moments without falling into utopianism. Through *kairos*, ethics acquires its concrete content in a certain period, where love as unchanging principle determines the action.³⁹ This emphasis on love as a guiding principle of ethics does not diminish the importance of laws and institutions, which store much experience and wisdom from the past. If these laws and institutions are the embodiment of love, then they can provide justice in a certain time: justice is always a secondary and derivative principle while love is the creative and basic principle that cannot be further defined.⁴⁰

With the formulation of the Protestant principle, Tillich succeeded in offering a distinctive contribution from Protestant theology. In a plural context such could serve as a general criterion and starting point in the moral discourse. It thus provides a criterion for questioning worldviews and religions (including the religion from which Protestantism itself originates) and their claims to truth and placing them under prophetic criticism, as Tillich calls it.⁴¹ In this way, the Protestant principle played an important role for Tillich in his fight against National Socialism,⁴² as well as in his rejection of historical Marxism.⁴³ In addition, the principle plays an important role as a starting point in inter-religious dialogue, such as Tillich himself, for example, entered into it with Judaism and later in his life with Buddhism.⁴⁴ Thanks to the Protestant principle, interreligious dialogue can be conducted on the basis of equality without falling into relativism.

In the ethics that Tillich has developed on the basis of the Protestant principle, the absolute imperative to love forms the transcending perspective. At the same time, he wanted to respect fully the specific situation in which a moral decision has to be made. In his study of Tillich's ethics, Stone argues that for Tillich every moral choice consists of a threefold analysis. First, the recognition of what love (including justice) demands in that particular situation, then in discerning the moral principles to be applied as relative wisdom, and finally in the 'loving listening' to a situation and its analysis using relevant human sciences. After the choice has been analyzed in this way, the risk of

39 Ibid., p. 176.

40 Ibid., p. 178.

41 Ibid., p. 231.

42 Stone, *The Ethics of Paul Tillich*, pp. 74–7.

43 Ibid., pp. 58–73.

44 Ibid., pp. 176–89.

making mistakes should not prevent from moral action in the knowledge that the *agape* is unconditional and therefore also forgives mistakes.⁴⁵

This ethical approach offers the opportunity to shed light on the moral aspects of the military profession from a transcending perspective. It does justice to a universal moral imperative and at the same time takes into consideration the concrete situation in all its complexity and the moral principles that apply to it. Because Tillich considers *agape* the guiding principle in making ethical decisions, his thinking about the deployment of the armed forces and the use of military resources differs in some aspects from his American kindred spirits, such as Reinhold Niebuhr and John Bennett, who stood in the tradition of the just war, in which justice is the determining principle.⁴⁶ The emphasis on love is an element in Tillich's ethics that is especially important for the moral guidance of service members by military chaplains. Love is a principle in human existence, which connects people even more strongly than justice. Chaplains can articulate this principle from the worldview and religions they represent and help military personnel to consider love as the guiding principle in making, and evaluating moral decisions. The Protestant principle formulated by Tillich and the way it functions in his ethics by considering love as the guiding principle in moral decision-making shows that it is very well possible to do justice to a particularity of one specific religion or worldview, which at the same time is relevant for the moral discourse in a plural context.

Nevertheless, some critical questions can be raised. First, it can be questioned as to how far a principle that is in force at every moment of history, can be so emphatically connected with Protestantism. Now it can be argued in defence that this principle has never come to light so sharply as at the time of the Reformation and can therefore rightly be called 'Protestant.' Besides, Tillich never had the intention to claim the principle exclusively for Protestantism. It could very well be present in other worldviews and religions as well.⁴⁷ Second, it is striking that in a contribution of the Christian faith to the moral discourse in a plural context the person and work of Christ is hardly mentioned, if at all. The contribution of Protestantism to the moral discourse therefore also needs input from theologians who draw attention to the universal significance of the person and work of Jesus Christ. This can certainly be said of the contribution Dietrich Bonhoeffer has made to the moral discourse as a public theologian.

45 Ibid., p. 10.

46 Ibid., pp. 168–9.

47 Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, pp. 203–4.

4 Bonhoeffer: A Christocentric Affirmation of Secularity and Moral Responsibility

In order to examine what Bonhoeffer's theology can mean for moral discourse in a plural society, the thoughts he developed in his unfinished *Ethics* and during his imprisonment are of particular interest.⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer worked on his ethics during the war until he was taken into custody. Bonhoeffer never aimed to present a detailed ethics, but rather wanted to sketch the space in which we as humans are placed and called to make responsible choices. Bonhoeffer's ethics, like all of his theology, is strongly Christocentric. Jesus Christ has made room for the reality of God through his suffering and death in this world. The purpose of ethics is to participate today in the reality of God in Christ in such a way that the reality of God is never experienced without the reality of the world and the reality of the world never without the reality of God.⁴⁹ With this premise, Bonhoeffer expressly opposes a basic idea that has dominated Christian ethics from the early Christian era – that is the claim that reality is divided into a sacred and a profane space, each with relative autonomy. Such a division of reality into two spaces implies a de facto denial of Christ's dominion over all of reality. To do justice to the fact that reality (as we experience it) does not coincide with the reality of God, Bonhoeffer introduces the concepts of 'the ultimate' (German: *das Letzte*) and 'the penultimate' (German: *das Vorletzte*).⁵⁰ He is not concerned primarily with a temporal distinction (the present versus the eschatological), but rather with a qualitative one. The ultimate is the justification of our lives based on Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection as God's final decision and includes both the beginning and the end of the penultimate. The penultimate as the road that the human subject follows stands in stark contrast to the ultimate as its justification:⁵¹ it does fulfill a function that Bonhoeffer typifies with reference to Isaiah 40 as 'preparing the way.' For the sake of the ultimate, the penultimate must be preserved.⁵² People should be able to be fully human. The destruction of the penultimate 'order' by injustice, slavery and dictatorship is an additional obstacle to grace. It matters whether the world is human or diabolical.⁵³ In view of the ultimate

48 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

49 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 55.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 150–1.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

it is therefore important that human life can develop in the penultimate. This is what Bonhoeffer calls natural life.⁵⁴

In his ethics, Bonhoeffer places great emphasis on the human being's responsibility for the development of earthly life. That is based on the conviction that Christ's reign encompasses all areas of life. It remains unclear how this responsibility is given shape in a plural context. In this respect, Bonhoeffer's prison letters from April 30 to August 23, 1944, in which he reports his latest theological insights to his friend Eberhard Bethge, can be seen as an important addition to his ethics.⁵⁵ One striking thing in these letters is that Bonhoeffer considered the world to have 'become of age.' By this insight he means that people can explain and shape the world from their own reason and that they no longer need God as a 'working hypothesis'⁵⁶ or as a last resort at the edges of life.⁵⁷ Believers should not bring up God at the edges of existence, but in the centre. It is there where the human being feels strong though God suffers from the world and is banished from the world until the cross. We are not redeemed by God's omnipotence, but by his impotence.⁵⁸ The mature world in its godlessness is perhaps closer to God than the immature world,⁵⁹ because it takes the world as it is and does not run away from its responsibility.⁶⁰

What can Bonhoeffer's ideas on human responsibility for the penultimate and on the 'mature' world contribute to the moral discourse in a plural context? Bonhoeffer shows with his theology and the way in which he has concretized it in his life that a view of reality inspired by faith and a serviceable attitude towards reality as it presents itself do not contradict each other and can go very well together. With his radical Christology, in which he mainly emphasizes in his ethics that reality belongs to Christ and in his prison letters that Christ belongs to reality, Bonhoeffer does justice to the uniqueness of the Protestant contribution to the moral debate: he does so while, on the other hand, he also takes the worldview and the way of life of the secularized fellow human and his contribution to the moral discourse completely seriously.⁶¹ With his appeal not to bring up God at the edges of life, but in the centre of it, he makes clear

54 Ibid., pp. 171–8.

55 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 361–519.

56 Ibid., pp. 425–6.

57 Ibid., p. 406.

58 Ibid., p. 479.

59 Ibid., p. 482.

60 Edward van 't Slot, *Zondig dapper: Bonhoeffer over christelijk handelen* (Utrecht, Kok Boekencentrum Uitgevers, 2019), p. 81.

61 Pieter Vos, 'Christus, de werkelijkheid en de ethiek', in Ad de Bruijne, Hans Burger and Dolf te Velde, eds, *Weergaloze kennis: Opstellen aangeboden aan prof. dr. Barend Kamphuis* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2015), pp. 89–99.

that this does not have to detract from the contribution of one's own religious conviction to the moral discourse.

We want to look also at what can be said from Bonhoeffer's ethics about the moral aspects of the military profession. First, the distinction he makes between the ultimate and the penultimate – and that the penultimate is preserved for the sake of the ultimate – is an important theological foundation for the maintenance of a military force. Natural life deserves protection from destructive and diabolical forces bent on its destruction. Second, Bonhoeffer succeeds in maintaining the right balance between duty ethics and situational ethics.⁶² The idea that a choice has to be made between one of the two approaches often paralyzes dealing with moral dilemmas in a military context. In such a situation it is enlightening to see how Bonhoeffer points out that we are not responsible towards a written norm, but towards Jesus Christ as the last reality: in certain circumstances Christ can free us from the law to act responsibly. It may be necessary in a given situation to suspend the law, but only to serve its true fulfillment. 'In war, for example, there is killing, lying, and seizing of property solely to reinstate the validity of life, truth, and property.'⁶³ Of course, this stance should never be taken lightly. 'Whether an action springs from responsibility or cynicism can become evident only in whether the objective guilt one incurs by breaking the law is recognized and borne, and whether by the very act of breaking it the law is truly sanctified.'⁶⁴

This brief exploration of the ethics of Tillich and Bonhoeffer demonstrates how Protestant theology yields insights for the moral debate in a plural context. These insights probably would not have been available for the moral discourse if they had not been brought to the attention by Protestant theologians. Therefore, with respect to the moral discourse in the military context, it could be said that there lies a responsibility with Protestant military chaplains to keep these insights available for the moral debate in this context and for the moral formation of military personnel.

This claim finally brings us to the question of the role of theology, and the role of chaplains in the moral formation of military personnel. Does the importance of Protestant theology consist in providing (occasionally) moral insights that otherwise would have been neglected? Does the role of chaplains merely consist in bringing these insights under the attention of military personnel, or does theology itself fulfill an (indispensable) role in the moral formation

62 Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2006), pp. 136–7.

63 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 297.

64 *Ibid.*

of military personnel and can this also be said of chaplains as theologians? The latter is the belief of Volf and Croasmun. We want to examine how they substantiate this position and what this means for the contribution of military chaplains to the moral formation of military personnel.

5 Volf and Croasmun: Chaplains as Articulators of Flourishing Life in the Military

Theology, according to Volf and Croasmun, is about what matters the most for human life: the true life of the world.⁶⁵ The quest for flourishing life, which means a life led well, going well, and feeling as it should, concerns every human being regardless of the fact of our basic needs like food, shelter and health are satisfied.⁶⁶ However, the problem of our present age, Volf and Croasmun assert, is that the quest for a good life has partly been neglected and partly been individualized. These modern ways of living ‘undermine our drive and ability to consider in a serious way the question of flourishing life.’⁶⁷ As a consequence ‘theology has an indispensable contribution to make in countering taste driven, individualized, unreflective ways of living and helping people articulate, embrace, and pursue a compelling vision of flourishing life for themselves and for all creation.’⁶⁸ In Christian faith, a flourishing life means in its eschatological (ultimate) sense that the earth and the whole of humanity is God’s dwelling place. This place is a metaphor for the good life that permeates the entire history of salvation from Genesis to Revelation.⁶⁹ Jesus Christ – in his person, his life, and his mission – is both the embodiment of God’s home among mortals and the promise of its full and universal realization.⁷⁰ In the present world, the flourishing life can only be found in its proleptic (penultimate) sense: that is a mode of true life under conditions of the false life. In the life of Christ (and his followers), some of the true life shines through and the suffering of Christ is the way in which God makes room for flourishing life in this world. As such, the suffering of Christ reflects the true life.⁷¹ The life of

65 Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019), p. 6.

66 Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, pp. 17–20.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

69 *Ibid.*, pp. 71–5. In addition to eschatological and proleptic, Volf and Croasmun use the expressions ultimate and penultimate in a similar sense as Bonhoeffer does.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

Christ's followers is marked by the tension that they still are part of the world that has not yet become God's home fully.⁷² This means for a theology of flourishing life that it 'ought to be able to show, in broad contours, how the vision of flourishing life it is commending ought to be lived in different stages and under different conditions of life.'⁷³

The oneness of God and the interdependence of the whole of humanity and creation entails that a Christian vision of flourishing life is universal and besides that, it is also exclusive. The true God stands opposite false gods and the true life is threatened by false life. Contemporary Western culture has difficulties with applying the categories true and false to religion and flourishing life. True and false are categories only applied to sciences – and, although some hope that science will also provide the answers for moral issues, that is not likely to happen. The sciences can answer the question what people desire but not what they ought to desire.⁷⁴ Volf and Croasmun argue that positive visions of flourishing life are unavoidable: so are contestations with other visions of flourishing life, but this plurality does not stand in the way that Christian visions of true life can co-exist, collaborate with, and learn from other visions of true life.⁷⁵ The main argument Volf and Croasmun provide for this statement is that theological visions may be universal and exclusive, but they can never claim absolute truth because of the infinite difference between God and man. Our knowing about God contains always unknowing and our truth claims contain always untruth.⁷⁶ That discernment can also be said of Christian visions of true life, partly because they are based on our knowledge of God, and partly because they are based on hope and statements about hope also involve unknowing.⁷⁷ Another concern about universality claims is that it seems to leave little room for individual expression. Volf and Croasmun assert that in the Christian vision of flourishing life there is no need for this concern, because it takes into account the changing particularities of individual lives in specific places. The Holy Spirit guarantees both the unity of faith and all its individual expressions and interpretations. Musical improvisation serves here as a metaphor. The structure places boundaries on the freedom of those who play within it. The life of Christ is the genre defining performance: it serves the individual Christian (with help from the Bible, church and theology) to improvise his/her individual performance. This metaphor can be depicted with an

72 Ibid., p. 80.

73 Ibid., p. 81.

74 Ibid., pp. 86–9.

75 Ibid., p. 89.

76 Ibid., p. 94.

77 1 Cor. 13: 12.

ellipse where Christ and the personal vocation and location are the two foci around which the individual Christian life is improvised.⁷⁸

Finally, Volf and Croasmun emphasize that the lives of theologians must correspond to the theology they propagate. This affinity between the theologians' lives and the visions of true life they seek to articulate is a condition for the adequacy of their thought. It is so not only because of the credibility of their vision but even more because of its veracity; a life that does not correspond with the vision hinders an adequate articulation of it. The nature of the affinity between life and vision is a striving for congruence between the vision of true life and the life led by the theologian. In this respect, Volf and Croasmun use the metaphor of a pilgrim who is on his/her way to a goal 'pressing on to make it his/her own' but has not yet reached it.⁷⁹ Some of the intellectual virtues that are needed in this respect are: love of knowledge for God and the world, courage, which means readiness to suffer for the claims one makes; gratitude and humility, in the sense that theologians should point away from themselves to a gift; firmness, without being rigid; faithfulness, in the sense of being dynamic instead of static; and being improvisational instead of merely replicative.⁸⁰

Volf and Croasmun's thesis that the flourishing life should be the subject of theology is convincing because of the strong Biblical and theological underpinnings they provide. The Christian faith thus comes to stand directly next to other belief systems and worldviews: it is represented by chaplains in the armed forces inasmuch as each in their own way propagate a vision of the good life. The idea that theology should be about flourishing life fits in well with a vision of the deployment of the armed forces with the aim of restoring that condition of living. It is consistent with the role that chaplains could play in this respect as agents of peace, as previously advocated by Volf.⁸¹

It is also striking that, without making explicit reference, in the image that Volf and Croasmun paint of theology as a vision of flourishing life a core element from the theology of Paul Tillich emerges: absolute truth may not be claimed for any religion or worldview. In the same way a core element of the ethics of Bonhoeffer appears: the emphasis on the distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate. Both elements are of vital importance to leave room in a vision of the flourishing life for the imperfection of our knowledge

78 Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, pp. 107–13.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 129 referring to Phil. 3: 12.

80 *Ibid.*, pp. 140–7.

81 Miroslav Volf, 'Agents of Peace in Theaters of War: Rethinking the Role of Military Chaplains', *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, 7:4 (2009), 33–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2009.9523413> [accessed 28 June 2022].

and the provisional character of the good life in the present world, and also with a view to an open dialogue with other visions of the good life. These resemblances between these different theologians indicate that despite the fact that the (Protestant) Christian faith shows the image of a quarreling family of beliefs rather than of a clearly demarcated belief system,⁸² there are nevertheless connecting elements as a result of which the (Protestant) Christian faith is not only recognizable, but also has a strong intrinsic theological basis for entering into a constructive dialogue with other faith traditions. This is essential in view of the contribution of Protestantism to the moral discourse in society in general and in view of the moral formation task of Protestant chaplains in the armed forces in particular. Finally, the idea that chaplains are present in the armed forces as theologians who stand for a vision of the good life and, in all their limitations, try to live out that vision sheds a special light on their moral formation task. According to this approach, to help soldiers maintain their moral integrity, chaplains not only take the moral convictions of the service members as their starting point, but engage in a dialogue introducing their own vision of the good life and living it out among military personnel. Hopefully, in this way they do not only strengthen the moral convictions of servicemembers with a different worldview or religion, but also inspire service members who do not feel affiliated with religion or spirituality at all.

6 Conclusions

We have observed that the present denominational division of military chaplaincy based on institutionalized religions and worldviews with respect to the contribution to the moral formation of military personnel is hard to defend. It is so unless an approach of moral formation can be provided from the internal religious or ideological perspective of the worldviews and religions that are represented in the military chaplaincy. Since the various chaplaincy services aim to contribute to the moral formation of military personnel in general, the contribution from worldviews and religions should be more than just be directed to the personal inspiration of those who share the specific worldview represented by a specific chaplain. An adequate approach of moral formation by chaplains should thematize the various moral aspects of the military world from a transcending perspective. It should seek to do justice to one's own perspective on what is good, just, and worthy of pursuit; it should also take into account the multitude of perspectives with regard to these themes.

82 Volf and Croasmun, *For the Life of the World*, p. 16.

In this article we explored a Protestant theological basis for such an approach and in doing so we developed a public theological perspective on the contribution of Protestant chaplaincy to the moral formation of military personnel. Our brief exploration of the theology and ethics of Tillich, Bonhoeffer, and Volf and Croasmun has shown that themes from Protestant theology can be introduced into the moral discourse in the armed forces and into the moral formation of military personnel that might otherwise remain underexposed. First of all, Tillich's Protestant principle, Bonhoeffer's theological acknowledgement of the world that has come to age, and Volf and Croasmun's account of the human quest for flourishing life make it possible to take into account the plurality of worldview perspectives as part of reality from a specific Protestant theological perspective. Second, distinctions between the relative and the absolute, the penultimate and the ultimate and between true and false conceptions of flourishing life provide a basis for accepting the necessity of the army and the need of taking responsibility for justice, prevention of disorder, the restoration of flourishing life and peace in the world. Finally, these distinctions enable to dialogue about visions of what is good, right and just in general and with respect to moral responsibilities of military personnel in particular from various worldview perspectives, without absolutizing one's own view on the one hand and relativizing what is to be seen as good, just and right on the other. In sum, this all provides a general, theologically substantiated basis for military chaplains to contribute materially and publicly to the moral formation of service members. A next step would be to explore how this approach could be developed more specifically, in such a way that chaplains' moral education appeals to the concrete moral responsibilities of military personnel and contributes to the preservation of their moral integrity.